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AUTHOR Mancini, Marc
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ABSTRACT

The conventional language lab, though it motivates few students, lingers on at many institutions. While poor study habits contribute to the lab's low impact on language acquisition, an equally credible possibility is that the traditional language lab's "audio-only" technology is ill-suited to the primary cognitive styles of today's video-oriented students. With support from the Rockwell Corporation and other granting agencies, West Los Angeles College (WLAC) has created a new generation foreign language support system. The lab uses four instructional components (i.e., audio, video, computer, and tutorial) and maintains a software collection of virtually every video and computer program currently available. Students enroll for a one-unit lab course along with their five-unit language class, and are allowed to gravitate to whichever blend of the four components appeals to them most. In the first year of the lab's operation, enrollment in foreign language classes at WLAC increased 32%. Student responses to the lab reflected enthusiasm over its features, and a desire for more extended times of operation. This program description includes software recommendations and guidelines for developing a multi-media language lab. (EJV)

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THE MULTI-COMPONENT LANGUAGE LAB

By

Dr. Marc Mancini
Professor of French and Cinema
West Los Angeles College

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In 1966, a major East Coast university installed the very "latest technology" in its language lab: a phone dialing access system. Without ever handling a tape but simply by knowing its pre-assigned number, students in each booth could "dial up" any program from a central bank of cassette players.

One of that lab's students workers, bored by a particularly dull stint at the control console, decided to insert his own Beatles tape into a seldom-used slot number, 99, in the central cassette bank. Feeling safe that no one would ever discover what he had done, he put on the console headphones and slipped into his own personal, secret rock and roll reverie.

Ten minutes later he glanced up. Nearly half the room was tapping along to something. Supposedly hard at work on their foreign language skills, but in fact restless and bored, the students had been randomly dialing numbers and had chanced upon channel 99 and its Beatles music.

I was that student worker. Now a language instructor, I look back on the incident with a mixture of embarrassment and amusement. But one conclusion seemed possible then and seems even more probable now: the language lab, in its conventional form, motivates too few of our students. Yet it lingers on at many institutions,

a dusty relic of World War II military research and the 1960's Space Race.

Certainly many ambitious and disciplined students still profit from listening to tapes and recording their voices for subsequent comparison to a master track. A new generation of cassette players makes that process more efficient. Yet resistance among students to the language lab remains, even grows: too many pupils continue to study in their carrels with headphones unplugged, to plead with teachers to waive their lab requirement, or to check in, disappear for an hour, then clock out.

Poor study habits certainly carry over to the lab and account for much of this behavior. But an equally credible possibility is that the traditional language lab design itself is perhaps ill-suited to the primary cognitive styles of today's students. For a large number of them, a language lab with only audio technology to offer is as quaint and irrevelant as the Palmer Method, slide rules or radio plays.

Radio drama is, in fact, a pivotal clue to how things have changed. The 1940's research that gave birth to language labs depended on subjects who were used to receiving much of their information from purely auditory sources, such as radio and phonographs. They knew how to concentrate on disembodied sounds. Television, however,

linked auditory information to visual stimuli.

Thus, the generation of students who arrived on our campuses in the 1960's found it difficult to concentrate on sound alone. In the twenty years since then this phenomenon has accelerated: in the average home today the television set is on 50 hours a week. It is no surprise, then, that youth demand images to go along with favorite songs, that they want their MTV. Nor should it come as a shock to contemporary teachers, who also know that the motivations of today's students have little in common with those of World War II GI's, who, in many studies, provided the language testing pool that led to the language lab itself .

It was thus with more than a little trepidation that I took on the additional duty in 1982 of language lab director at West los Angeles College. Our lab was a dinosaur, with oversized cassettes that were no longer manufactured and brittle wiring that would short out whenever the Santa Ana winds blew. We at the college had a vague idea about the type of lab we needed: something that addressed the contemporary, diverse cognitive styles of our extremely pluralistic student body, that incorporated up-to-date yet off-the-shelf technology, that was inherently motivating and appealing, that balanced high-tech with "high touch". That we were a community college struggling through a state budget-cutting mood, however, dampened our dreams.

A serendipitous change of events occured though, in 1983. Robert DePalma, Chief Financial Officer of the Rockwell Corporation and a foriegn language buff, contacted us with a simple question: why was he having so much trouble finding foreign language videos or computer programming? I explained that there were very many reasons, but one of them was certainly a veritable catch 22: language labs didn't have the technology to deploy such materials, manufacturers therefore didn't create the software, colleges therefore saw no reason to invest in hardware since the software didn't exist. DePalma helped us break that vicious circle: Rockwell would provide seed money to help create a new generation language lab.

Three years later, Rockwell's faith, and that of other granting agencies, has paid off: West's lab has become a productive support system for our foreign language instruction and a magnet for inquires from other institutions. Moreover, we were one of the first labs to implement the wealth of materials that have appeared only in the past few years. We have made our mistakes and had our little triumphs. In either case, our experiences may be of some use to other educators as well.

As it now operates, our lab utilizes four discrete instructional components: audio, video, computer and tutorial. None of the equipment is especially exotic: a dozen Apple PC's, thirty Sony tape decks and ten 1/2"

VCR's. Our software collection, though, is extensive: we have virtually every video and computer program currently available. (Indeed, one of our prime functions has been to provide the opportunity for Southern California educators to sample and compare materials before purchase.)

Students enroll for a one-unit lab course along with their regular five-unit language class. Each student receives a twenty page "Guide to the Language Lab" which outlines usage policy and cross-references software to each textbook chapter. There is also a separate section which describes the content of each individual video or diskette. Book-specific software is underscored, but we likewise encourage students to use other software materials to expand each week's lesson.(The dovetailing of a generic or other-book series to a student's work is not always precise, but these materials can be a useful supplement to what has already been introduced via class or textbook. Our students, though they prefer to first use book-specific software, seem untroubled by the new vocabulary or previously unseen structures in generic material. Rather, in many cases, it appears to challenge them.)
Each student is allowed to gravitate to whichever blend of the four components appeals to them most. This no doubt maximizes the motivational aspect of their work, though we plan to soon institute more vigorous procedures, including a cognitive mapping test that would suggest

a pedagogically precise road for the learner. In the meantime, we find that 35% prefer audio tapes, 25% the computer, 20% video tapes, and 20% tutorial, though almost all split their time between several components.

After three years of trial and error, several "lines" of software have became notably useful to us and noticeably popular among our students. We are especially pleased with the cleverness and instructional soundness of those computer materials which Heinle and Heinle and D.C. Heath have created. Schoolhouse Software manufactures a very useful series of "generic" programs and Langenscheit's Correct Behavior diskettes foray into genuinely fascinating cultural territory; both are well-received by our students.

In video, we give equally weight to Zarabanda, (EMC-Films Inc.), Hablamos Espanol (U of Oregon) and Survival Spanish (Miami-Dade) for our Spanish students. Contact French, Jean Rassias's series for CBS-Fox Video, is one of the most technically sophisticated yet least known video programs; our students are deeply enthusiastic over Rassias' energetic presentation. A Vous La France (EMC-Films Inc.), for its more extensive use of French, finds great popularity among instructors and advanced students. What we have seen of Antenne 2's Papa Poule is charming, though not all of its episodes are currently available.

Heinle and Heinle's, The French Way, produced by SUNY at Brockport's Bernard Petit, has great promise:the most recent installment,

dynamic and dense with information, is equally useful for the classroom. We await with great anticipation the release of PBS's high budgeted French In Action, produced by Yale and WGBH. And for intermediate-level students, we make extensive use of the hundreds of foreign feature films which are now available on low cost, 1/2 inch cassettes. (Features are first screened in the classroom, then reviewed in the lab.)

And what concrete results have all these resources produced? In the first year of the lab's operation, general enrollment in foreign language classes at West Los Angeles College increased 32%. Considering that the college suffered a considerable decline in overall enrollment during the same period, we would like to conclude that the lab played a key role in the school's foreign language success. (Since then, language enrollment has continued to increase.)

Student surveys have consistently pointed to a pride in the lab and an enthusiasm over its features. (In the most recent survey, 78% of the respondents rated it "very good" to "excellent.") Many wanted more extended times of operation, more staff members to operate the lab, and a wider selection of software. (Though sixteen hours per semester are required, 8% of the students logged in over sixty hours and worked through the spectrum of material rapidly.) In other words, most students, rather than trying to avoid

the lab, want more of it. Some still do resent the lab requirement, but it is usually because they have jobs and have little discretionary time or, through a quirk of State tuition policy, because taking the lab course can double their total tuition.

Since we were in some sense the "first on the block," we have also become a resource to the educational community. Since our opening, over 500 educators and administrators, both from the high school and the college level, have visited our lab. This has led to at least a dozen language labs at other institutions that are based on varing aspects of our model. We have installed a pilot program with Venice High School which brings their ESL students to our lab each morning. Special times for non-student, community use have been set aside (the result of some rather militant demands made by retirees!).And at least a dozen college staff members have themselves enrolled in the lab course: over-enthusiasm is indeed our problem.

What recommendations can we make to those who are planning new language labs?

**Be prepared for the widespread availability of video and computer software created for the home but easily adaptable to education. The home video market, for example, is one of the most explosive retailing phenomenoms today: over $6 billion of prerecorded video tapes were sold last year; 400 new titles came out every month. Currently, there are about

a dozen foreign language instructional programs available, but we have found them to be generally too narrow or amateurish for lab use. This will surely change as leisure learning through home video becomes more firmly entrenched.

-** As for software prepared for the education market, expect prices to lower as the line between home and institutional blurs. Long term leasing, off-air/satellite rights and in-house duplication permits are some ways by which suppliers are already reducing costs. Films Inc. for one, has fashioned a creative pricing scheme for its excellent BBC series (which includes German, Russian, Italian and Greek and Chinese programs, in addition to Spanish and French). The makers of French in Action seem to have a similar strategy in mind.

-**To faculitate repair, purchase equipment which the general public also uses. 3/4" video equipment may be durable, but these days 1/2" machines are five times less expensive; a Barcovision large screen projection system may be impressive in a lab screening room, but a 50-inch Mitsubishi home unit will be far easier to maintain. At least 10% of your budget should also be reserved for safety locking devices and, perhaps, service warranties with the supplier. You should also establish stringent operational procedures to minimize inadvertent software damage and discourage software theft.

-**To borrow a term from aerospace, your lab design should be "redundant." There should be back-up delivery systems for each principal setup. For example, each T.V. monitor and audio cassette deck should be wired both to individual cassette units and to a central distribution point. This permits flexibility and minimizes "down-time." Your lab should also be adjacent to or part of your campus general learning center to permit "spillover" when it is crowded or when equipment is being repaired.

-**Acquire student audio duplication rights or establish bookstore tape sales from the very start. Students will most certainly ask for tape copies for their own use; they will do it with greater frequency than you probably anticipate. Their enthusiasm should be encouraged, as long as you have the staff and legal right to make copying feasible.

-**Design your lab in such a way that its carrels are durable and can be easily reconfigured. Among the technologies you must expect to integrate into your lab within ten years are life-like computer voice synthesizers (they will perhaps replace all tape functions except student voice recording), computer voice recognition (permitting computers to assess pronunciation or respond to oral, not typed,commands), interactive video discs (which will free computer programs from the predictable, lock-step logic we now have today) and, ultimately, free-form computer programs that approach artifical

intelligence (MIT's Athena project is working toward precisely this). Textbook manufacturers will also routinely provide audio, video,and computer material to accompany all their texts. Five years ago only a handful of such programs existed. Today there are several dozen (we estimate that you could purchase a complete collection of everything now on the market for about $30,000). In just a few years there will be hundreds to choose from; their quality will become a major factor in your textbook decisions.

-**Do not undervalue the human element in your lab operations. Ideally, tutors or T.A.'s should be present at all times to answer questions, encourage performance and monitor activities. Also, as much as a dramatically designed, technologically sleek lab can make students feel that they are at the cutting edge of things, it must also incorporate "softening" elements to relax its users as well. At West we paid great attention to chair comfort, color schemes, acoustics, lighting, plants, wall-hangings and the like. Each of our computer stations is at a 45 degree angle to the next, in an octagonal-like configuration; this encourages limited student interaction yet discourages distraction.

-**At the beginning of the semester a tide of lab users will swamp your staff with their needs. In order to deflect some of this, ask each faculty member to explain, in class, the lab's services. You should also assemble a printed guide with explicit

policy statements and detailed descriptions of your holdings, and, perhaps, as we have done, create a short video that "walks" each student though the lab's operation.

There is always a nagging fear that a lab can usurp the instructor's pivotal role in language acquisition. If there is one modest but overriding lesson we have learned at West, it is that a lab can take on many of the chores of drill and practice, magnify student enthusiam for language and culture and free the classroom teacher to concentrate on the kind of spirited, communication- based language proficiency that we all desire in our students. Brought up to 1980's standards, the language lab can be a powerful tool indeed.

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